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Building the Perfect Product

The Commodification of Childhood in Contemporary Fairy Tale Film

Naarah Sawers

In the twenty-first century, when genetic manipulation, robotics, organ transplants, and neuropharmaceutical drugs are familiar to most people's worldviews, the story of a little boy who is literally built by a paternal figure continues to engage audiences. The wooden puppet, Pinocchio, written into the cultural imagination by Carlo Collodi in 1883, provides a significantly different representation of childhood than contemporary ones but nonetheless continues to inform current questions about what childhood is, or should be. Collodi's original written text and its screen version, produced by the Disney Corporation in 1940, still speak to cultural analyses of childhood because they reflect a trajectory between the socialization of children and changes in capitalist society.

Collodi's *Pinocchio* provides a metaphor for the social construction of childhood, including what is necessary for the child's successful integration into adult society, and the Disney version offers a dominant model for fairy tale films in the big business of entertainment for children (Zipes 1996). While the ideologies in the book and the film reflect the sociohistoric times when they were created, both texts have important intertextual themes that re-emerge in contemporary films. However, scientific interventions into our bodies have become much more commonplace than they were when these *Pinocchio* texts were produced, and thus this chapter deals with the way films engage the concept of the built child to examine where they position childhood in the growing merger between science and capitalism.

Although they vary in their approach to the physical construction of their protagonists, *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (directed by Steven Spielberg,

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2001) and *Robots* (directed by Chris Wedge and Carlos Saldanha, 2005) share with the literary fairy tale *Pinocchio* the notion of a child as manufactured. David (Haley Joel Osment), the protagonist of *AI,* is not only made by humans but is also literally designed for human consumption. As a mechanical, substitute child, he exists as a product in a market of human desire. He is a robot child, programmed to love in a future dystopian world where human capacities for care and responsibilities to others are demonstrably wanting. In *Robots*, however, humans are conspicuously absent in ways that suggest that the robot characters populating the world of the film are metaphorically human in much the same way as anthropomorphized animal characters in films like *The Lion King* (directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994), *Shark Tale* (directed by Bibo Bergeron, Vicky Jenson, and Rob Letterman, 2004), and *Kung Fu Panda* (directed by Mark Osborne and John Stevenson, 2008). Indeed, using all robot characters as a metaphor for the human condition demonstrates the way that contemporary consumer society now focuses on the alteration of bodies.

Robots ostensibly critiques this new form of consumer capitalism. However, its critical surface is as easily removed as are its characters' external casings. This malleability is partly due to the ways in which it draws on the Disney fairy tale film model without employing the self-reflexivity available through intertextual referencing. Consequently, the film reinforces consumer capitalism primarily through focusing on the body as the center of commodification. *AI,* on the other hand, much more overtly references *Pinocchio* and critically engages the ways in which contemporary filmic stories for children potentially position them as objects for consumption.

While these two films of the new millennium draw on their fairy tale predecessors quite differently and provide alternative cultural perspectives on contemporary childhood, both persistently demonstrate that the manufacturing of childhood in the contemporary Western world is becoming much more literal than symbolic. The role of science in robotics and organ/tissue distribution and exchange is crucial to new consumer enterprises, and both films point to the commodification of the child/body within these new scientific parameters. Unlike their intertextual ancestor, Pinocchio, the protagonists in the films in this chapter are not rewarded with a biological human form, and this shift away from the original narrative indicates the significance of scientific and technological interventions in human lives within contemporary capitalism.

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Pinocchio, Childhood, and Capitalism

Considerable cultural anxiety accompanies the relationship between the child and consumer capitalism. Beryl Langer argues that present-day concepts of childhood, which center on the sacredness of children (where childhood is a time of enchantment), conflict with the ways in which children and childhood have become subjects of corporate greed and exploitation (2002, 71). However, the relationship between children and capitalism is changing, and these alterations are evident in Collodi's story of *Pinocchio,* the Disney version, and, as this chapter demonstrates, contemporary iterations.

The developmental process of Collodi's protagonist results in him becoming a "nice little boy" ([1883] 1973, 214). Niceness here is consistent with the responsibilities of a peasant boy in the nineteenth century and is thus demonstrated by hard work (necessary for capitalist economies) so that it is unsurprising that Pinocchio is principally affirmed when he works tirelessly for his father. The narrative explains that "by his industry, ingenuity and his anxiety to work and to overcome his difficulties, he not only succeeded in maintaining his father . . . but he also contrived to put aside forty pence to buy himself a new coat" (Ibid., 211). However—unlike what boys may do in the shopping-focused present day—Pinocchio doesn't buy himself a new coat. Instead, he gives the money to the fairy, a character who gives him advice about appropriate decision making throughout the narrative. The fairy is sick and impoverished at the time, so Pinocchio returns home and works not just until ten at night but until midnight to make more money for the fairy's well-being (Ibid., 212). This "pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps fairytale" (Zipes 1996, 11) describes the position of childhood in an industrial society where children become part of the workforce: their integration into society is marked by their ability to labor for production.

The shift from the child as an industrious worker, who labors primarily for the sustenance of the family, to an individual consumer can be traced through the growth of the Disney empire to which—along with the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (directed by David Hand, 1937)—the film version of *Pinocchio* (directed by Hamilton Luske and Ben Sharpsteen, 1940) was absolutely critical (particularly as a model for future fairy tale films). As has been well documented, Disney made himself fastidiously familiar with Collodi's story but also took huge interpretive license (Zipes 1996).

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Disney was concerned with the socialization of American childhood in the 1930s and '40s, a time when America was suffering an economic depression but was also looking toward a future of expansive economic growth during and following World War II. His intention was to capture a mass-culture market (Wasko 2001) and "offer hope in the form of beautifully made films that provide escape from the grim realities of America" at the time (Zipes 1996, 16). To accomplish this goal, the story line is minimized and replaced with enhanced images, songs, and dances that reaffirm the moral lessons. This model has become extremely influential in children's animated and fairy tale film, becoming a new commodity where "the fairy tale film sacrifices art to technical innovation; innovation to tradition; stimulation of the imagination to consumption for distraction" (Ibid., 9). Child audiences of films based on the Disney model are therefore considered primarily consumers, and thus the shift from the written narrative to the film one represents a conflation of pleasure and consumption.

Contemporary children's identities are thus defined by a relationship of desire with consumerism. Children learn not only that they must consume but also that their choices assemble their sense of self in relation to others. The consumer child becomes normalized in contemporary society as "a historically specific product of capitalist market expansion which requires that they learn 'how to want, and in a very particular way'" (Langer 2002, 72). Consumption is increasingly integral to children's sense of self because brands have become signifiers of identity and group affiliation (Bullen 2009, 498.). However, desires for capitalist products can never be satiated because, while consumer societies rest on the "promise to satisfy human desires," this "promise remains seductive . . . only so long as the desire stays ungratified" (Bauman 2007, 80). Therefore, to sustain consumer capitalism, its signifiers into which young people are enculturated must shift so that fulfillment is always deferred and obsolescence guaranteed. Films for children are embedded in this process: not only is the film a product of consumption, but merchandising, cross-selling, and product placement promote a range of brand names with which children identify (Kenway and Bullen 2001). Many authors in this collection note that the primary intention of popular fairy tale film is the creation of a mass commodity. My examination extends this insight to reveal the way the two films I discuss position children as

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consumers in the diegesis[1] and/or the way the films critique the process of making children into consumable objects.

Both are mainstream movies with big budgets and well-known actors, but *Robots* is an animated production for children, and *AI* is a live-action, dystopian film with a PG-13 rating. *AI* thus speaks more overtly to the way adults perceive childhood in a contemporary consumer-capitalist world. The film marks a specific change in the relationship between childhood and capitalism where the child has literally become the product for consumption. However, this shift from the child as a consumer to the child as a product can also be traced in *Robots* because, although it critiques the construction of children's identities through consumerism, it simultaneously assumes and reinforces the notion that children are consumable. The idea that the child is a commodity primarily comes from the way *Robots* sees the body as a consumable site, where organs and tissues are metaphorically exchangeable. The film thus engages in debates about methods of exchange, either through the economic system or gifts. However, the turn in the relationship between capitalism and childhood initiated by new scientific interventions is a point of contemporary anxiety that is visible in *AI.*

AI: Tales of Perpetual Childhood

If Disney's *Pinocchio* constructs a protagonist who is "almost too perfect to be true" (Zipes 1996, 20), Spielberg's *AI* literally creates the perfect child as a commodity. It depicts a future world where environmental destruction has wreaked so much havoc that it is legally sanctioned for couples "from the developed worlds" to have only one child. Mechanoid robots, or *mechas,* such as the prostitute lover robot, have been built for immediate, but temporary, gratification of human demands. The film thus reflects present-day realities where machines are already used for labor and robot toys are increasingly entering the marketplace.[2] Extending the market for satisfying human desires, the film opens with Professor Hobby (William Hurt), from

1 Similarly Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse demonstrate in their chapter in this collection that *Enchanted* (directed by Kevin Lima, 2007) entices its female viewers to consume, not only by showing the main characters shopping but also in Disney's marketing of products, such as dolls and clothing related to the film.

2 The Japanese company Sega, for instance, recently released a robotic girlfriend that kisses on demand. Minako Sakanoue, a spokeswoman for Sega, is quoted as saying, "She's very lovable and though she's not human, she can act like a real girlfriend" (Busty Bot for Lonely Hearts 2008).

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the company Cybertronics, proposing to his colleagues/students that they invent a mecha child, a type of "substitute" who will be unique by being programmed to love unconditionally.

In this key scene, the computer scientists and robotics designers gather in a Cybertronics classroom that, reminiscent of a university tutorial, implies an educational institution. But the institute housing this learning is also a multinational robotics company. Consequently, education in this future world is about science thinking creatively to sustain consumer capitalism, and the film foregrounds the growing relationship between the two. The lack of ethical deliberation about the cultural implications of the creative products that result from this merger becomes an ideological center in the film. Though science works to serve capitalism—which perceives cultural criticism and research provided by the humanities as less valuable because they cannot be quantified by market worth—fictional and fairy tale films offer a medium for critical and ethical reflection about where humanity is heading. *AI* addresses this concern by canvassing the social implications a neocapitalist world has for human relationships, particularly when childhood is the focus of new science.

However, the question of ethics is not lost on one of Professor Hobby's female colleagues, who points out that humans may be able to program a mecha child to love its parent(s) but asks, "Can you get a human to love a mecha back?" She wonders aloud "what responsibilities does that person hold to the mecha?" Mechas are used for human services, as the narrator explains, and, except for their initial manufacturing, don't use valuable resources. However, they are a lower order than humans, and the tension between organic and mecha beings is represented in the film by human characters who discuss being taken over by these new others. However, the film does not simply pit humans against mechas in a hierarchy that assumes human superiority; instead, its comments about the human capacity to be responsible to other humans (and organic and inorganic nonhuman entities) in a neocapitalist world are far more compelling.

The question of reciprocal love between humans and robots drives the plot because it also shapes the quest of the mecha-child protagonist, David. The first mecha child built by Cybertronics, he is given to Monica (Frances O'Connor) and Henry Swinton (Sam Robards) as a substitute for their son, Martin (Jake Thomas), who lies in a cryogenic state due to an unexplained accident five years earlier. After David arrives at their home, Monica "imprints" him so that he is programmed to love her unconditionally.

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However, shortly after David has been imprinted, Martin miraculously recovers and returns home. Although Martin looks like a cyborg with mechatronic assistance for his legs and a large supply of pills to keep his body functioning, he is very much Monica's real son. David, on the other hand, may "look like someone's ordinary kid" as Martin observes, but is—as Henry reminds Monica—"inside, just like all the rest . . . a hundred miles of fiber."

The ensuing antagonism between Martin and David, and the threat David's love for Monica creates for the family, causes Henry to insist that Monica take David back to Cybertronics to certain death. Instead, she leaves him in the woods—like the children in "Hansel and Gretel" or "Babes in the Woods" (ATU 327A) and "Snow White" (ATU 709)—in what amounts to an aggregate of fairy tale references that preempt childish adventures. Monica tells David she "wishes she had told him more about the world"; for his part, David pleads with her, saying, "If you love me, I'll be so real for you."

In this film, reality or knowing the self as real is therefore intimately connected to relationships with others, specifically, the mother. Even though Teddy, the mecha supertoy (an upgraded, computerized version of the stuffed bear) who is with David throughout the narrative, and Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), the sex robot David befriends on his adventures, prove to be far more caring, David doggedly perseveres in his quest to return to Monica.[3] He traverses the classic three fairy tale adventures of conflict and escape (Zipes 1996, 19) and discovers the brutality of humans who revel in destroying mechas Colosseum style and ultimately obliterate biological life on earth. The end of the film races forward to show audiences that after two thousand years, human civilization has been destroyed. Aliens now inhabit the earth, and David and Teddy are frozen at the bottom of the ocean, having never returned home to Monica and the Swintons. However, after David and Teddy are revived, the aliens recreate Monica at David's request so that he spends a final day with her, and she tells him that she loves him.

Many critics read this ending as Spielberg "sentimentality" (Morrissey 2004, 250). In his discussion of the concluding scenes of the film, Thomas Morrissey writes that Spielberg attempts to "put a happy face on this dismal human self-portrait" and consequently the "classic dystopian theme—the

3 Pauline Greenhill and Anne Brydon discuss family relationships in fairy tale film in this volume. Also Sidney Eve Matrix looks at the representation of sexual relationships.

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horror of enforced, perpetual childhood—is set adrift" (Ibid., 250). However, happy endings for protagonists are expected in contemporary fairy tale films because of the homogenization of the genre by Disney (Wasko 2001; Artz 2004). Yet, Disney doesn't deserve all the blame; even Collodi acquiesced to the reading public's demand that the puppet become a real boy, thus creating a satisfying and happy conclusion (Zipes 1996, 12).

In drawing upon *Pinocchio,* the film indicates the ways that stories for children construct childhood by socializing their audience. However, because the fairy tale intertext in *AI* is embedded within a dystopian narrative about the relationship between childhood and science in a capitalist world, a tension between the genres results. Indeed, Spielberg harnesses this tension to comment critically on cultural anxieties about the role of new scientific technologies and the function of stories for children by adults in relation to new economic realities.

The crux of the happy ending for contemporary Disneyfied films includes the triumph of the good character (Wasko 2001, 119) and, in line with traditional quest narratives, a return home (Campbell 1968, 246). However, even though the conclusion of *AI* seemingly adapts these conventions because David's quest is successfully completed when he receives his mother's love in the family home, the final scenes do not include the values of "fixed meanings" and "certainties about life" that usually accompany closure in fictional stories for children (Stephens 1992, 41). Instead, the mise-en-scène in the conclusion constructs a counterfeit image because the house (setting) and Monica (character) have been recreated specifically for David by the alien beings. More tellingly, the creation and experience of their loving relationship is constructed as a quasi-theatrical performance where David and Monica are actors—stringless puppets—in an artificial house with the alien audience watching from above.

The element of puppetry crucially invokes the Disney film. Its protagonist, Pinocchio, was considered unique by the evil Stomboli because he was a puppet without strings. Stomboli wanted to use Pinocchio to earn money by performing onstage (made much simpler by the lack of strings). Thus, when Spielberg creates a scene where the characters remind us of stringless puppets, he raises the question of whether the good protagonist, David, in fact triumphs in his quest. He wishes to be a "real live boy," a desire he believes will be granted through his mother's love and the blue fairy. The blue fairy is a direct reference to Collodi's text, which Monica had

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read to David and Martin, but the fairy only appears in the film as a large Madonna-like statue that David and Teddy find at the bottom of the ocean.

That David's reality is contingent upon the blue fairy—as an intertextual reference to *Pinocchio* and thus to fairy tales—demonstrates the significance of stories for children in constructing childhood. The need for a mother's love and the consequences of its lack are deeply embedded in stories for children and can be connected to myths and fairy tales that frequently include absent and cruel mothers and stepmothers (Warner 1994). But the way the relationship between the mother and child is interpreted has become the foundation of cultural (and scientific) investigation through psychoanalysis.

David's experience of himself and love as real is thus further challenged by the object of his desire. What the audience sees is a primordial (and perverse) scene of the pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and son. Monica and David spend the day together alone, without Henry or Martin. When Monica disposes of her wedding ring, it signifies that their love will be unimpeded. Indeed, the viewer is left with the image of the couple asleep in bed together, holding hands. That David's journey concludes with the son, like Oedipus, actually sleeping with the mother suggests that he does not progress to the symbolic order or through the Oedipal complex to establish his identity and achieve maturity. Rather, unable to separate from his mother, David remains in the unformed state of childhood, and this scene is probably the most abject one in the film.

Viewing audiences both create and consume the concluding scene within the diegesis and, as puppet masters, are integral to the way the relationship plays out. The ending comments about the way contemporary relationships, particularly between adult and child, are subject to capitalist and psychoanalytic influences embedded in stories for children. *AI* is a film predominantly for mature audiences, and adults are thus the creators and consumers of the commodified child (as a perfect entity whose love is unreserved and unrelenting). It is even more telling, then, that in the final scene the audience consumes, fulfillment is satiated; it is the moment of plentitude. Crucial to psychoanalytic models of development is the separation of the mother from the son, just as contemporary consumer capitalism is based on the insistence that people separate from products that previously promised satisfaction. This separation (or obsolescence) is built into consumer societies because "for the expectations [of satisfaction] to be kept alive and for new hopes to promptly fill the void left by hopes already discredited

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and discarded, the road from shop to garbage bin needs to be short and the passage swift" (Bauman 2007, 82). In this sense, the film marks a critical juncture in the workings of human relationships in a consumer society because it marks the point where consumer capitalism is entirely sidelined: both parties, mother and son, are complete in each other's company.

Consumer capitalism and psychoanalytic models require that real boys displace their mothers for an endless chain of referents. While Monica's biological son, Martin's, normative (human) development progress requires him to replace his mother with love for endless other things and people, David is not (and can never be) absorbed into capitalist culture. He is consumed by love for the mother and needs no material possessions, not even the food, shelter, and other basic necessities that are precursors to the consumer drive. So indelible is this mother love that he cannot be reprogrammed and would have had to be euthanized—making him in some ways the logical conclusion of the humanist belief in an immutable essential self that postmodern and psychoanalytic thinking has challenged.

While science can facilitate the construction of perfect children (or the creation of designer children), where the child becomes a commodified product promising gratification, the nature of the closing scenes in *AI* contests these assurances by affirming the endless repetition of desire that psychoanalytic development models posit as crucial to human subjectivity. That the audience observes the pre-Oedipal scene reinforces fairy tales' role in the socialization of children, particularly the ways in which their interpretations have often been reduced to psychoanalytical narratives (Tatar 1992). This point is significant because it places the blame for any difficulties faced by child protagonists on the children themselves and, in turn, sanctions interventions into childhood. Maria Tatar notes that "if we read myths and fairy tales through the lens of the oedipal drama, we will necessarily see the child as the sole target of therapeutic intervention, for it is children who must work through the feelings of anger expressed through the stories told to them by adults" (1992, xxvi).

AI thus clarifies that the reiteration of the Oedipal drama in cultural contexts and through children's stories and their interpretations results in the wholly manufactured child (intervention in extremis). Furthermore, stories for children that formulaically conclude with happy endings reinforce these promises of self-fulfillment. In the Oedipal drama—and psychoanalytic models that rely on it—human subjectivity is based on lack. Thus,

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consumer society is sustained because consumption promises to satisfy desire initiated by lack.

David's love for Monica is as fixed as are happy endings in stories for children. However, Monica's love is more flexible, which means that David can be a substitute son with the potential to take Martin's place in her affections. Had Monica bought this toy child, she would be unreflexively emblematic of what is perhaps the most shocking new dimension of consumerism—the purchase of children—and indeed, David is a prototype model who is sold. However, that Monica is an uncertain recipient of this gift (rather like gifted, as opposed to bought, organs, as I will discuss) is one of Spielberg's most critical choices in depicting the relationship (or disjunction) between consumerism and genuine love.

Consuming a child who has been wholly manufactured is the dystopian emphasis of the narrative. That children may become commodifed objects is, in the main, a reprehensible idea.[4] However, there is often a slippage between the consuming child—whose identity is built upon patterns of consumption—and the commodified child, who becomes the product of adult consumption. This gap depends upon new manifestations of consumer society that focus on the body and is exemplified by the heroic narrative writ through Rodney as the youthful protagonist in the animated film for children, *Robots.*

Robots: New Biotechnical Fashions

Robots is a conventional mainstream animated film for children. Though not created by Disney, it nevertheless draws on the children's animation model made famous by Disney's *Pinocchio.* The narrative in *Robots* does the work that *AI* critiques: it presents an Oedipal trajectory as normal and natural, concludes with a happy ending, and is entirely devoid of ethical deliberation or self-reflexivity (favoring instead distraction through consumption). My analysis of *Robots* demonstrates that this film, as emblematic of contemporary films for children, presents the commodification of the child as natural. It thus socializes children to assume that their commodification is not simply a natural process but a culturally sanctioned right. No

4 The presence of so-called surrogate motherhood—the medical commercialization of conception—and the advent of "push presents" (expensive gifts from father to mother, often offered during the actual delivery of a child) suggest that the commodified child is a current reality.

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longer simply subject to consumer influences, the child's quest is to become a product for consumption.

The shift from the child as consumer to the child as commodity occurs primarily through new scientific discoveries that focus on the body. Manufactured bodies result not just from robotics or cyborgs but also through biotechnical interventions in human bodies. Biotechnologies are the main players in creating designer children. In her analysis of the relationship between children and new science, Elaine Ostry argues that biotechnologies focus on "creating 'improved' children, designer babies, screening foetuses, and as the material site for the administration of neuropharmaceutical drugs" (2004, 222–23). However, in a global capitalist world—the "killer whale inside which we have to live" (Suvin 2003, 193)—biotechnological enhancement is not a philanthropic enterprise.

The ethical dilemma in *AI* centers on the boundaries between the nonhuman robot and the organic human, and David's nonhuman or manufactured difference remains at the center of the narrative. However, in *Robots,* the characters are all manufactured robots standing in for humans. Using robots as the main characters, rather than anthropomorphized animals, for example, enables the surface story to critique consumer capitalism and thus capitalize on cultural anxieties about children and consumption while, at the same time, promoting the interests of consumer capitalism predominantly through the unquestioned assumption that human beings are enhanced or manufactured. Defining the characters this way means that their mechanical bodies are subject to wear and tear and replacement of parts with newer, better ones is a necessity. Thus, what is particularly telling about this film is the way in which it both critiques the obsolescence and waste in consumer society and simultaneously undermines this criticism by firmly (though metaphorically) reinforcing new biotechnical businesses.

Robots overtly criticizes consumer capitalism by initially marginalizing the protagonist and his family and friends because of their economic status. Rodney and his family, the Copperbottoms, are from the lower socioeconomic class. His father, Herb, is a dishwasher in a restaurant in the small midwestern-style community where they live, Rivet Town. Early in the film, Rodney moves to Robot City, and the friends he makes there are in a similarly dire financial situation. Their lives are threatened because they can neither get new parts for their dysfunctional bodies nor afford the only product available to replace them. It is therefore the Copperbottoms' and Rodney's friends' inability to access all that consumer society offers—and

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thus the marginalization of the poor in a consumer-driven society—that is the subject of the film.

In addition to aligning viewers with the underclass by directing their sympathies to the potentially obsolete characters, *Robots* appears to critique corporate malpractice and the abuses of today's capitalism by comparing 1950s values to those of the twenty-first century. *Robots* opens with Herb, Rodney's father, running through the streets of Rivet Town telling people that "the baby is being delivered today." The street scenes hark back to an era when children's identities did not depend on their consumer habits. The toys on the streets of Rivet Town include skipping ropes, slinkies, and wind-ups, all long-lasting products compared with those that Beryl Langer calls *commoditoys.* Generic toys, such as building blocks, dolls, toy cars, and train sets, may be handed down through the generations. Commoditoys, on the other hand, "are characterised by their capacity to stimulate rather than satisfy longing"; they have a "short but intense 'shelf life' as objects of desire"; and their essential feature is that "satiation is endlessly postponed" (Langer 2002, 70). The generic toys in the initial scene reflect the community spirit and family atmosphere of Rivet Town, and the film's nostalgia for this environment and its values opposes the speed, waste, and alienation of contemporary consumer society.

The physical appearance of Rodney's dad, Herb, also recalls postwar American values because his chest is a 1950s-style dishwasher. However, he is exploited and exhausted by his work dishwashing so that he regularly tires at night and brings his work home. Rodney, concerned about his father, creates Wonderbot, an (animated) invention to lessen his workload. Rodney takes Wonderbot to Bigweld, the benign CEO/owner of Bigweld Industries, who wants to make the world better by using technological progress to advance human happiness. His slogan, "See a need, fill a need," sums up the good model of technology, that it is designed to make life easier. The message therefore is not that industry and production are bad but that their contemporary manifestations involve wasteful obsolescence, generated by commoditoys and advertising that produce desires in consumers that don't reflect genuine need.

But the robot characters in *Robots* are not supertoys or commoditoys like *AI*'s Teddy. Instead, as metaphorically human, they suggest that people are becoming obsolete and must be repaired or replaced. This process is most obvious from the physical deterioration of Herb. Rodney's quest takes him to Robot City to introduce Wonderbot to Bigweld, but his father gets

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increasingly sick while he is away. We see this decline when Rodney calls home, and a mechanic/doctor is peering into Herb's open chest, surveying the damage. Herb tells Rodney that they are "having a little trouble finding your old man a spare part." The unavailable spare part (read, heart) is thus parallel to people's access to health services where the boundaries between the cosmetic and noncosmetic, and the life-saving and life-extending medical interventions, are fluid.

According to the anthropological scholarship of Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell, the most compelling promises generated by the merger between biotechnologies and capitalism are "the fantasies of immortality" (2006, 17). Bodies are intensely recast in the current era of biotechnologies, especially because they are the site for new science and capitalism's expressions of selfhood. The fact that Herb's anatomy includes a dishwasher emphasizes this fusion by making a consumer product a fundamental part of his being. But related to capitalism's expressions of selfhood through the body, the dishwasher positions Herb within a labor economy, rather than a consumer one, because he is literally defined by his work. However, his relationship to capitalism changes when he receives the spare part to fix his deteriorating body. This development shows that Herb has access to the new consumer economies that center around science and the body.

In contemporary consumer society, the body has become an adjunct to the marketplace; the central significance of new biotechnologies is the "unprecedented possibility of extending life indefinitely with the organs of others" (Waldby and Mitchell 2006, 179). The spare part that Herb has trouble finding thus reflects the perceived lack of body tissues or organs in the current world and the increased demand for them. It marks the body as a consuming site integrated into the trade in body parts and materials, where human flesh becomes fodder for the dynamics of capitalist consumption. However, and most significantly, what underlies these biotechnical practices is the promise that tissue economies will deliver self-regenerating bodies (Ibid.). This development has "created a cultural desire for, and sense of entitlement to, self-regeneration among ageing populations of the wealthy North" (Ibid., 162). This new expectation of longevity also puts pressure on "real-time" therapies, for instance, organ transplants (Ibid.). For these therapies to become accepted as a moral right within a market economy, society needs stories that make the transactions that precede them seem ethically uncomplicated. Unlike *AI,* which draws attention to the way stories for

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children are implicated in manufacturing bodies as normal, *Robots* sanctions the rise of tissue economies.

These new scientific economies are based on neoliberal ideas, where the body as commodity and exchangeable is accepted as an individual choice or right. As a commodity, the body is also subject to market economies. Whether or not organs should be marketable products is the subject of current bioethical debates, particularly in America (Joralemon 2000). The narrative of *Robots* supports the ideological imperative sustaining the commodifiable body by making the distinction between need and want as a way to correct consumption patterns, and then establishing a tension between the two, beginning with playing off the terminology of delivering goods against delivering babies. Rodney's own construction offers the most profound example. When he is born/built, the film highlights biotechnological interventions into childhood; Rodney's parents, for instance, choose his nose and eyes from his grandparents, they select his sex, and when he cries, they simply turn the sound down. The film doesn't challenge this early (medical) childhood intervention by the parents.

However, as Rodney grows and becomes too big for his external casings, he receives new "parts," which are donated by cousins and humiliate him, particularly those from his cousin Veronica, whose parts are coded feminine. Parts thus function as a metaphor for both clothes and body organs, where the former is identified with desire for fashion and the latter with necessity. However, when Rodney's impoverished street friends in Robot City, the "outmodes," are headed for certain death without access to parts (they are literally falling apart), their parts unquestionably represent organs, rather than clothes. Any potential criticism of want (which consumer capitalism promises to fulfill) is undermined by needs as access to life-saving or regenerating health services (spare parts).

By the end of the film, Herb does not receive just one new part but "enough parts to make two of [him]," including a saxophone to replace his dishwasher. His material (biological) gains are due to Rodney's achievements. The son progresses up the social ladder because his reward is material wealth far beyond his childhood circumstances. Having destroyed the film's antagonist, Ratchet, Bigweld and Rodney return to Rivet Town. In the concluding scenes, Bigweld tells the community, including Rodney's parents, that Rodney is his "right-hand bot" and "eventual successor."

Rodney thus becomes a model for contemporary capitalist success aligned with correct Oedipal development, and this image is reinforced by

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his love interests. He is initially admired by Piper, one of the street kids who befriends him when he gets to Robot City. Piper is identified in the film as available for romantic conquest, and she is young, spunky, and outspoken. However, Rodney literally outgrows her and thus manifests the capacity for maturation that *AI*'s David can never share. Rodney therefore seeks satisfaction from an upgraded model in Cappy. She works as an executive officer for Bigweld Industries and symbolizes the trophy wife. Unlike Piper, who is made from colorful spare parts, Cappy is a shiny metallic gray, wearing an expensive hegemonic outfit unavailable to the underclass outmodes, and is regularly admired for her physique. In the final scene, Cappy's presence by Rodney's side consolidates his manhood by symbolizing the ultimate reward and thus demonstrating what self-improvement can achieve. Rodney's movement toward this final goal entirely counterpoints David's stasis. He has successfully displaced his desire for a mother to others, and thus his innate lack will be (temporarily) gratified by acquiring them.

Acquiring female others, extensively critiqued in feminist scholarship, becomes increasingly disturbing as society in the global North moves into harvesting body parts from underclasses and the global South. Rodney exists as a consuming body, but the hand-me-down parts he receives during his childhood mean that he has to rely on the generosity of others. Herb's type of body, attached as it is to his labor worth, positions him outside present-day tissue economies. Herb is teetering on the edge of the underclass Zygmunt Bauman observes as emerging in the new consumer economies that focus on the body: those who are "truly and fully useless—redundant, supernumerary leftovers of a society reconstituting itself as a society of consumers" (2007, 101). But he is saved by his son's success and, like the elite, aging, and wealthy of the global North, is now entitled to self-regenerating economies.

In a gesture of material exchange between men that constitutes patriarchy (Sedgwick 1987), Herb's new parts are a gift from Bigweld. However, Herb's receiving them is wholly determined by his son's economic success; Rodney's reward is to become a corporate capitalist just like Bigweld, and in doing so, he can reward his father with a much-needed body part (heart). This singular gift-giving event, which identifies Bigweld as a particularly benevolent character, is entirely underscored by a market economy in parts. There is no question that these acts of giving will be extended to the outmodes or the general population of impoverished robots needing (wanting) new parts. In this case, gifts are the exception to the rule, and the norm is a

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market economy; thus this story socializes child audiences into conceptualizing the body within a market ethos.

This new representation of Pinocchio in *Robots*' Rodney is therefore similar to its predecessors in foregrounding his relationship with his father. Son provides for father as Collodi's Pinocchio did; Rodney makes his father happy as Disney's Pinocchio did; he was built obedient, honest, and diligent (and male) and thus was always "easily manipulated for the good of the country, the good of the corporation," as Zipes argues in the case of Disney's Pinocchio (1996, 20). But Rodney has become a particularly good child because he literally embodies the force behind the expansion of global capitalism into the realm of the body, and he single-handedly enables his father's access to this new aspect of consumer society. The dystopian world constructed and critiqued in *AI* is realized through precisely this type of story, which invites child audiences to aim for successes similar to Rodney's.

Today's Stories of Body Building

Like Pinocchio, Rodney is humanized by his love for his father and his capitulation to ever-changing capitalist systems. Capitalism relies on patriarchal hierarchies so that the Oedipal boy child, by identifying with the father, can shift his desires away from the pricelessness of mother love into the space of continually shifting wants. A female substitute ultimately replaces the mother but only boys who become men by attaining a successful place as money earners in the capitalist system can acquire her. In contrast, David and Monica are consumed by their uncontested love for each other. Thus, it is Monica's love for a nonhuman child, described on the same level as her love for her biological son, that destabilizes capitalism. If she genuinely loves David, he will become—like a real son—irreplaceable. If he can't be upgraded for a new model, then how will capitalism flourish?

That *AI* embodies both a threat and a comfort, a happy and disturbing conclusion, indicates the film's criticism of Disney-style fairy tales for children that avoid the ethical complexities in the modern consumer world. There remains concern, then, about the tales told to children to civilize them into ways of being. The use of the metaphor of the built child puppet in the *Pinocchio* texts has lined up with capitalist changes from socializing the child into joining a productive labor force to inducing her or him to shape an identity based on consumption. But modern consumer society has changed once again; now it has its sights set on human bodies. As Bauman

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explains, "The consumer's/consuming body is 'autotelic', its own purpose and a value in its own right; in the society of consumers it also happens to be the ultimate value" (2007, 91). In line with this aim, contemporary films employing the metaphor of the built child do so much more literally than did their predecessors. To civilize contemporary children into hegemonic society through stories, they must understand their bodies as consumers in and of themselves.

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